

# Teachers' Views on the Applicability of the Turkish Course Curriculum in Crowded Primary Classrooms

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## **Abstract**

Present study investigated relationships between classroom overcrowding and the Turkish education curriculum (2006) in terms of the applicability of activity-based lower secondary Turkish education curriculum in overcrowded classes. In addition, the problems that occur in the teaching process and the sufficiency of time for the program were investigated. Qualitative research methods were used in the study. By conducting semi-structured interviews with 11 Turkish teachers of overcrowded classes, the effects of overcrowded classes on the applicability of the Turkish course curriculum was examined. To analyze the data gathered from teachers, categorical content analysis and QSR Nvivo were used. At the end of the research, it is observed that in accordance with the program, Turkish teachers have to work one to one with each student; that teachers find that the activities do not meet the objectives due to pressure of time resulting from overcrowding. Suggestions are construed such as doing group work to lower the effects of overcrowding.

## **Key Words**

Primary Education Turkish Education Curriculum, Classroom Overcrowding.

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The ideal human model of the 21st century paradigm lays the acquisition of communicability. Making individuals more open and eager to communication is the main objective of the modern educational institutions. Communication takes place through a medium. This medium is what we think of as the most advanced and perfect of all, language.

Teaching a mother tongue is the foundation of all lessons, especially in primary education. Because once one achieves competence in mother tongue, he/she will be a student whose thinking structure and commandment power, the taste of emotion and elegance develop and who starts identifying the national and universal culture background and achieve other courses with a great extent. Not transferring these skills to students effectively causes students to encounter problems in other courses (Akyol, 2006; Demirel, 1999; Kavcar, Oguzkan, & Sever, 1998; Ozturk, 2007; Sagır, 2002; Sever, 1997).

Developing reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, which are fundamental for all subjects, is a part of Turkish language education; however, these skills cannot be fully developed due to overcrowding in Turkish classes (Demirel, 1992). Overcrowded classes both hinder the accomplishment of the course objectives and reduce the efficiency of the class activities in application-focused Turkish courses.

It is known that non-crowded classrooms affect academic success positively. Research states that there is a relationship between the number of students and academic success where learning and academic success is higher in less crowded classes than classes with higher number of students (Aydin, 2002; Bakioglu, 1999; Bakioglu, & Polat, 2002; Balki, 2003; Blatchford, 2003; Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2005; Celik, 2002; Gezer, 2007; Hattie, 2005; Jin, & Cortazzi, 1998; Korkmaz, 2006; Ogulmus, & Ozdemir, 1995; O'Sullivan, 2006; Ozbay, 2003; 2006; Tezcan, 1997; Topbas, & Toy, 2007; Uludag, & Odaci, 2002; Yaman, 2006; Yapicilar, & Leblebiler, 1997).

Number of students in a class across the European Union member countries is much smaller. For example, in Luxembourg, the average is 17-18 students and 20-26 students in Portugal (Eurydice, 2008). Blatchford and Mortimore (1994) listed the positive effects of lesser number of students in a class as better teaching quality (facilitating material use and evaluation); utilization of course program; com-

pleting the basic education activities more quickly; sparing more time on different activities; focusing on students longer; sparing less time for classroom management and student control; having more time and place in the class; improved teacher-student relations; and classroom atmosphere.

The inability to have the students do sufficient exercises and homework on oral and written expression and free reading in overcrowded classes lies among the common views suggested by both teachers and academicians on the problems of the Turkish language education. With the curriculum which necessitates one to one attention on each learner, monitoring and providing feedback to learners cannot be satisfactorily performed in overcrowded classrooms.

Effectiveness of the daily life communication depends on a proper mother tongue education. The Teaching Program for Turkish Courses (2006) based on activity and constructiveness (see Koc, & Demirel, 2004; Ozerbas, 2007; Tarhan, 2004; Tynjälä, 1999) requires that individual differences in students' mother tongue education should be taken into consideration. It is observed that there are issues in implementing this program in Turkey because the average number of students per class in schools is 50 students (see Guclu, 2002; Sarp, 2000). After examining the literature, it can be deduced that the learning-teaching process is more effective and academic success is higher in classes where the number of students is smaller.

The present research aimed to discover the relationships between classroom overcrowding and the Turkish education curriculum (2006) in terms of the applicability of activity-based lower secondary Turkish education curriculum (2006) in overcrowded classes. In addition, relationships are investigated in terms of the problems that occur in the teaching process and the sufficiency of time for the program. In this context, the purpose of the research is to determine the applicability of primary-school second-stage Turkish Language Teaching Program in crowded classrooms from the point of views of teachers. Additionally, the knowledge of Turkish language teachers on the fundamental philosophy of the program; problems they had encountered when applying the program in crowded classrooms; their applications to reduce these problems; the usability of the group study, and positive effects of crowded classrooms on language skills of students are studied.

## Method

### Model

Qualitative research methods are used in the study. This research is a definitive *case study*. Case study is usually focused on educational research, educational applications, programs, institutions, or systems (Bassey, 1999; Patton, 1990; Silverman, 2005).

### Participants

In this study, criteria sampling method was used, which is one of the sampling with purpose methods (Punch, 2005; Yildirim, & Simsek, 2005). Due to the nature of the research characteristics, this sampling format had to be selected. The work group of the research consists of 11 teachers who have crowded classes (with a student number above 30).

### Collection of Data

The interview form was prepared by the researcher and consists of questions revised by the three faculty members for its scope validity. In the interview form, which was prepared according to the framework of experts' opinions, there are 10 open-ended questions, the questions had been asked with a semi-structured manner, and when necessary, drilling questions had been directed to participants. Also in this study, validity was provided by taking quotes from teacher views, where the codes and categories are obtained (Altunisik, Coskun, Bayraktaroglu, & Yildirim, 2005). Reliability was provided by carrying the process of turning raw data into codes and categories by two researchers.

### Data Analysis

By conducting semi-structured interviews with Turkish teachers of overcrowded classes, the effects of overcrowded classes on student success was questioned. Interview records were transcribed and analyzed. To analyze the data gathered from teachers, content analysis was used (Bell, 1999; Miles, & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1987; Robson, 2001).

Categories were created in the axis of concepts emerged from the

analysis of interview texts by two researchers, in addition to the questions in the interview form. Computer aided qualitative data analysis program QSR NVivo 7 was used in the analysis and modeling of research data.

The main categories acquired during data analysis process are: (i) Turkish teachers' knowledge of constructivism, the fundamental philosophy of the Turkish Language Education Curriculum (2006); (ii) The problems teachers face while applying the student centered Turkish Language Education Curriculum in overcrowded classes; (iii) The activities teachers can make use of during the implementation of the curriculum; (iv) The contribution of class size reduction to 20-25 to solution of the problems; (v) The positive effects of overcrowded classes on students' language skills; (vi) The ways in which teachers solve the problems in overcrowded classes in practice; (vii) The opinions of Turkish teachers on the applicability of group work to eliminate the effects of overcrowding.

## Results

At the end of the interviews with 11 Turkish teachers, it was found that overcrowded classes have negative effects on the application of the new Turkish Language Curriculum. The teachers are aware that the curriculum has been designed in accordance with the constructivist philosophy which requires student-centered learning devoid of memorizing and in which knowledge is constructed in learners' minds. They also find the new Turkish curriculum positive due to the fact that it is an activity-based program which develops application stage skills.

According to the findings, Turkish teachers evaluated the constructivism based Turkish Education Curriculum (2006) as a student-centered program which requires students to actively participate and research; in which teacher's main role is guidance and knowledge is gained intuitively. Besides teachers noted that although the activities, designed on the basis of multiple intelligence theory to stress different skills of each learner, require one to one attention to each learner, the class sizes are high whereas time is short.

On the other hand, a number of Turkish teachers, stressing that students' active participation can only be obtained through group work

in overcrowded classes, voiced the necessity of a program adjustment to include more group work activities. They also expressed their concerns about the problems in the nature of group work activities (such as lagging students who have low self-confidence or students who lack sense of responsibility). In addition, teachers suggested preparing adjusted activities for these classes and assigning and checking homework out of classroom.

### Discussion

According Schoenfeld (1989), group dynamics is the basic component which forms individuals' opinions. Group work and social interaction provide communication with others in individuals' learning process and also provide development of ideas. Vygotsky often stressed the role of cultural habits and social communication in the development process of humankind. Indeed, this approach is really about *social constructivism* (Wood, 1999). Knowledge, according to social constructivism, is a structure created by individuals in a social and cultural environment. Individuals create the meaning by contacting with the environment they live within. Learning is a social process. Meaningful learning occurs in social activities of individuals (Kim, 2001). Indeed, learning has a social characteristic, according to Vygotsky. A child, who listens a debate thinks during the discussion. In fact, the child absorbs the ideas and then works individually. Social communication is an important component of learning. Creating a social interaction environment in the process of learning, supports cognitive development (Orlich, Harder, Callahan, & Gibson, 2001; Yurdakul, 2007). In a research study, it was identified that teachers do not consider the nature of the classes and mutual impacts of student in organizing the teaching activities (Hattie, 2002). Karabenick (2003) identified that students ask for help from teachers is reduced in crowded classes. Finally, the effect of crowded classes on the contribution of students to learning and teaching activities was studied by Usherwood and Primhak (1996). They identified that individual learning, team work, and project management skills of students are improved as a result of applied group work.

Blatchford (2003) observed that students with low class size have much more time on language and mathematics activities compared to geography and history. Indeed, in the findings of this research

suggest that Turkish language teachers had stated that the activities in Primary School Turkish Language Lesson Program should be reduced in number and teachers should prepare appropriate lessons for the classroom.

Turkish language lesson is a skill course rather than an informative course. What have to be done by teachers when focus is on students in event-based applications is tracking and immediate feedbacks. When one examines the time allocated to Turkish language lessons, it is observed that crowded classes are naturally deprived of these applications. As expressed by teachers, in cases where one to one tracking and feedback is not possible the tracking and feedback can be performed on groups.

As suggested by teachers, group work can be instrumental in overcoming the setbacks posed by overcrowding. Because the main objective of Turkish courses is to help students comprehend their mother tongue it is reasonable to think that activities for language skills development can be carried out in the form of group work. It is also highly probable to obtain students' active participation through group work in overcrowded classes while applying the new Turkish Language Education Curriculum which encourages continually an active student model.

Students should be brought together, according to their different success levels when forming the groups. In this way, interaction between students can be provided and learning can be eased. Preparing many of the activities, which will be included in the program, appropriate group study, can reduce the negative effects of the problem, although it does not solve the problem completely. Assessment can be performed by considering the performances of students within groups. It is remarkable that measurement and evaluation systems have effects on the implementation of activities in Turkish language textbooks. High expectations from students, which their success had been evaluated by study papers and activities in formal education, on examinations like the SBS and OKS tests, to show their success is also accepted as a dilemma.

The Turkish Education Curriculum requires one to one attention on each learner so that learning errors and deficiencies can be dispelled. One to one attention on students means to spare certain amount of

time with each student. Therefore, adequate class size is essential for the curriculum's success. In our country schooling, ratio is not parallel with the population growth ratio due to economic reasons, resulting in excessive number of students per class. Consequently, the new curriculum cannot be implemented in the intended way and does not provide desired efficiency. Furthermore, the teachers lose control of their classrooms and disciplinary problems occur.

The fundamental skill area of the Turkish education can be developed effectively through application-based activities. In the student-centered activities, the main role of the teacher is to monitor the learning process and provide necessary feedbacks. When the time for the Turkish program is considered it is evident that crowded classrooms cannot fully benefit from these services. Thus, as stated by teachers, when one to one monitoring and feedback is not possible, group monitoring and assessment can be suggested.

Since investments on education are directly related with the economical conditions of the country, it does not seem likely to reduce class sizes to the ideal level in near future (Education Reform Initiative, 2005; Titiz, 2004). Therefore, as a practical solution, programs can be readjusted to have more flexibility for its application in overcrowded classes. For prospective researchers, it is strongly suggested that they investigate problems with qualitative techniques by observation of crowded classes.



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